

The world today is in need of heroes. We need those who show us the path to be good and reflect the great potential of the human spirit. While I'm glad to say I have many heroes, I think often these days of one in particular. Little known but most relevant for our present day, the British parliamentarian William Wilberforce is indeed a hero for our times.

William Wilberforce was born in Great Britain in 1759. His country in that day was very much like the United States in our own time. They were a world superpower but were threatened at home by a coarsening of culture and fading morale. Worst of all they were beset by the evil of slavery. They understood well the vital lesson however – if they would not strive for goodness they would surely lose their greatness.

William Wilberforce entered the British parliament in 1780 with two monumental goals: the abolition of slavery and the reformation of culture. The first, for which he worked tirelessly and is now so gratefully remembered, marks a turning point in human history. Thanks in large part to William Wilberforce the British people stood up against the horrors of the slave trade and eventually abolished slavery itself. He fought for what was right and stood up for the voiceless. Against all odds, the goodness deep in the hearts of the British people won out.

The second great object that occupied Wilberforce's energy in parliament was the reformation of the culture. He understood that in order for Britain to do great things they needed to be good. To combat the great evil of slavery they needed a culture that encouraged what is right and discouraged what is wrong. They needed a people willing to sacrifice and to fight for the dignity of another. Great Britain of the nineteenth century, not unlike America today, needed a culture worthy of their great goals for their people and for all humanity.

Wilberforce is a helpful guide in another difficult question of our day, the place of religion in the public square. He was a person of faith who rightly saw his faith as a value not a vice for public life. He was a committed Christian who took seriously the instruction to "love thy neighbor." It was his notion of the immensity of human dignity that led him to fight for men and women everywhere and without exception. He worked for prison reform, to help the weak and downtrodden, and most of all to end the abhorrent institution of slavery. Seeking to impose nothing but only to propose a vision of human dignity, his faith committed him to justice in the public square. We are a grateful world for his witness and courage.

Finally, Wilberforce is a model to reject the partisanship that often enters debates today. His example makes clear that it is principle that combats partisanship. Leaders who stand for a particular set of values – even if there will not be total agreement on every point – represent the surest hope for civil discourse. Principled leaders do not divide simply on party lines, seek not their own good or that of a particular party, but the good of the whole people. William Wilberforce is the model of a leader with conviction.

William Wilberforce and his monumental achievement is indeed the story of Amazing Grace. It is the story of heroic leadership and courageous action on behalf of the weak and marginalized. It is the story of William Wilberforce, a hero for our times.